DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 384 CS 213 842

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TITLE Initial Opposition--Won't Portfolio Assessment Take Away Teacher Autonomy?
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; College Faculty; Higher Education; *Portfolios (Background Materials); *Program Development; Program Implementation; Resistance to Change; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Role; *Writing Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS Alternative Assessment

ABSTRACT

Unacknowledged and untended opposition can lead the "resistance" to destroy even the best planned of portfolio systems. The greatest cause of initial resistance to portfolio assessment is the fear that teachers will lose their autonomy and/or authority in the classroom. Writing instructors need to ask themselves about issues of control and autonomy: Why do they have so little faith that those they work with will share their beliefs about what constitutes good writing and good evaluation practices? They might also question what makes them so sure that their teaching is so special, and what might be gained from letting go of some of the control they wield over assessment and grades. The following strategies can make portfolio assessment stronger by avoiding resistance of faculty: (1) answering hard questions raised by the opposition; (2) planning the program as a group of peers rather than as individual administrators; and (3) piloting the program on a small scale, using both resistant and non-resistant faculty. Supporters of portfolio programs need to analyze the nature of the opposition's complaints, give credence to their very real concerns, and invite their participation in reshaping not only the portfolio assessment program but also the writing curriculum. (RS)

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"Initial Opposition--Won't Portfolio Assessment Take Away Teacher Autonomy?"

Marcia Dickson

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It's a funny thing about the words Opposition and Resistance. When I put the article The in front of Resistance and use it to refer to a band of underground French soldiers in World War II, I can conjure up images of noble confrontation: a "rag-tag" band of fighters defying the Nazi occupation. Or, if I put the same article in front of the word Opposition and use it to refer to the minority side of any political body, suddenly I see Henry Fonda fighting the evils of big-time politics.

But Resistance and Opposition can take on quite negative meanings--especially when any of one of us is being resisted.

Let's take a not-so-hypothetical case. Say you spent a number of months planning, organizing, researching and developing a departmental portfolio system. You've introduced everyone to the idea, conducted workshops--you've even called in outside experts to testify to the joys of portfolio assessment. Then...just as you prepare to put the program into action--or even worst--just after you've put the plan into action, a friendly peer or a concerned chair (not that the two are mutually exclusive) utters one simple phrase: "I think there's a little resistance growing."

Suddenly it's hard to believe that sabotage doesn't lurk in the hearts of THE RESISTORS, even harder to not to begin to immediately plan how to "beat down" THE OPPOSITION. The breakneck redefining of the two key terms here is not unwarranted. Unacknowledged and untended to opposition can lead the resistance to destroy even the best planned of portfolio systems.

How does resistance to portfolio assessment develop? Why can the initial opposition be so vehement? Why can't everyone understand that portfolios are kind, virtuous, and good to students? (I'd stop short at claiming that they have vitamins and minerals.)

Really, now. What's to object to? What's to dislike?

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Quite a bit, actually. The most common complaints are these: the paper work will increase. Storage space, always at a premium, will become even scarcer. The amount of time spent on revising the portfolio will shape the course of the semester or quarter. This list is only partial, and many of the objections are legitimate. But to me, these complaints represent minor issues. In my experience, the greatest cause of initial

resistance to portfolio assessment is the fear that teachers will lose their autonomy and/or authority in the classroom.

What is this autonomy that we will lose? It has been argued that:

--Other teachers will judge the quality of our students' work, making the decisions that it is the individual teacher's right to make.

--other teachers, having greater access to the student papers and assignments from our classes, might take to judging the assignments we make and the way we grade the papers that result from those assignments.

--Outside readers, with no direct access to our students, will not have our intimate knowledge of student performance in class and, therefore, will be unable to assess the level of improvement or the nature of their class participation.

--we might even have to agree to grades that we don't feel are rigorous enough or are too harsh.

In all cases, the central issue amounts to this: the teacher does lose partial control over the all-important grade. Autonomy seems to boil down to the right to grade according to our own standards--without worrying about anyone else's.

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves a few questions about issues of control and autonomy.

The first question may seem a little off-base, but I feel it's extremely relevant: Why are we so unsure of ourselves and others?

When we talk about sharing evaluation, we're not talking about handing our students' portfolios to complete strangers. Why does the teacher in the next classroom--the same one who shares papers in the hall, asks for advice (or gives advice) over lunch, serves on committees with everyone else--become the problem grader, the unreasonable teacher, the unreliable colleague, when they become the other reader in portfolio assessment? True, there are incompetents in the profession, and there are unreliable souls who do not devote the time or energy to the careful reading of student papers. But these slack-offs are hardly the <u>majority</u> of our colleagues. Why do we have so little faith that those we work with will share our beliefs about what constitutes good writing and good evaluation practices? And even more radically: Who says they have to agree with us just to work with us?

There's a related question that we have to ask--although it might step on some toes. What makes us so sure that our teaching is so special? What about our particular perspective on writing is so sacrosanct that we need not be open to others' readings of student papers? Did we have the ultimate teachers? Do we alone hold the secrets of teaching students to how write?

Finally, this question: What might be gained from letting go of some of the control we weld over assessment and grades? If we give up absolute control over gatekeeping, then we give up our

roles as keepers of the English Language. If we give up our right to be the final judge of a portfolio's worth, we give up our right to be the final authority on our students' worth.

I don't know about you, but I'm ready to give up those items. I've spent too many years worrying about my own spelling and sentence structure, much less my style (whatever that is) to regret biding adieu to my own position as gatekeeper. I've had too many problem portfolios (and individual papers) to feel threatened by hearing someone else's opinion.

I've studied too much literary theory and composition theory--in fact, I've lived too long--to ever believe that I have the final answer about anything--much less how to make everyone happy participants in portfolio assessment. But I do have suggestions for establishing a comfortable peace. I think the following strategies can make portfolio programs stronger.

First, we should ask and answer the hard questions that the opposition raises:

--Who controls the classroom when everyone is subject to portfolio assessment? How can the individual teacher's pedagogy be preserved?
--Who controls the students' grades?

The answers, as you might expect, are not so simple that they can be answered here, today, now, in detail, by any single member of this panel (They certainly can't be answered by me--even if I could be there).

Why? Because the answers, as always, depend upon the context of the program, teachers, students and countless other items. At a conference we must be content merely to engender more questions--questions that a department can use as a starting place for planning a portfolio program:

-What's the nature and goal of the writing course?
--Who teaches?
--What and how do they teach?
--Who learns?
--What and how do they learn?
--What's the goal of the assessment?

Answering these questions is the first step in dealing with resistance. Until the entire department has discussed what they expect from a course, a student, or a final product, they can't help but be suspicious of each other. Think about it for a moment. E. M. Forster is famous for saying "How do I know what I think until I see what I say" (or somebody famous said something relatively close to that). How do we know what we believe about what constitutes good writing or what we consider when we assess a paper or a portfolio, if we don't write it down and see if what we say matches what we believe?

The second way to avoid resistance is to plan the program as a group of peers rather than as individual administrators. Yes, getting the entire department to work on planning a program is

often tantamount to disaster. However, if an individual faculty member feels he or she has no say about the way in whcih the portfolio is set up--or about what criteria will be used to judge the writing--or about how much the portfolio will count towards a class grade, they'll resist the program, no matter how pedagogically sound it might be.

Finally, I would suggest that the wise WPA pilots the program on a small scale, using both resistant and non-resistant faculty. Why include those unruly, uncooperative, nagging members of the department? Why not just stick with folks who will be supportive, who believe in portfolio assessment? Because the disbelievers and the grouches will surface eventually. And if they are part of the planning, they will probably be less likely to sabotage the program when it goes to full implementation.

(A QUICK DISCLAIMER! Knowing faculties as I do, I make no guarantee that they will be completely co-operative just because they're in on the planning)

It helps to think of the whole problem of resistance and opposition like this: Resistance can be as valuable as it is troublesome. We should not try to still the voices of discontent. Those who oppose us can often point out legitimate problems, can force us to be creative planners, teachers, and graders. Rather than using what limited power we posses to fight The Resistance and The Opposition, we need to analyze the nature of their complaints, give credence to their very real concerns, and invite their participation in reshaping not only our portfolio assessment program but also our curriculum.

Your Resisting Reader,
Marcia